



Army Engineer Divers in the Fight

By First Lieutenant Thomas Darrow

The most common response Army divers hear when explaining their profession—no matter what they are doing or where they are in the world—is “I didn’t know the Army had divers.” Although Army divers have been in the fight since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, this response is still heard today in Iraq, Kuwait, and the rest of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility. The 74th Engineer Team (Dive) and the 544th Engineer Team (Dive) were deployed to serve during the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and their missions primarily consisted of conducting river reconnaissance, mine clearance, bridge demolition, hydrographic surveys, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) searches, and personnel recovery (see “Army Diver Missions in Iraq,” *Engineer*, July-September 2003, page 28.) After completing five months of service, the 544th was sent home, but in December 2005, was again deployed to support Operation Iraqi Freedom. The unit conducted its relief in place (RIP)/transfer of authority (TOA) with the 511th Engineer Team (Dive). Currently, the 544th falls under the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) C-7 (engineer staff section) and Area Support Group–Kuwait (ASG–KU). Although some missions have changed over the past few years, many remain the same.

Scope of Work

The presence and usefulness of the Army diver is historically lost in the constant changing of the guard within CFLCC and Multinational Corps–Iraq (MNC–I). It has become customary for the dive team commander to conduct briefings for the combatant commander and high-ranking officials in Kuwait, Iraq, and Bahrain for CFLCC, MNC–I, and the United States Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) on the Army engineer diver mission and their broad scope of work.

Security Swims

One mission consisted of assisting a Navy explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) unit with antiterrorism force protection (ATFP) security swims at shipping ports within the CENTCOM area of responsibility. To date, the 544th has conducted more than 30 ATFP security swims. The team works with local officials to assist in the port security mission, which usually involves the help of the Navy Criminal Investigation Service (NCIS) and local medical support. The major customer of the ATFP security swims is the Army watercraft team. The watercrafts maneuver throughout the CENTCOM area of responsibility, providing necessary resupply items.

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Since the watercraft team is well aware of the usefulness of Army divers, it takes full advantage of the other benefits the dive team has to offer. In addition to conducting hull surveys and clearing screw propellers, the 544th has cleaned the bottom of vessels maintained by the United States Army Materiel Command (AMC). These vessels are part of the pre-positioned stock of Army watercraft maintained by AMC. The divers have also recovered ammunition, weapon parts, and personal equipment dropped over the side of vessels while in port.

Personnel Recovery

The 544th was also called on for one of the more unfortunate, but honorable, missions an Army diver can accomplish: the recovery of a fallen service member. While planning another mission, an inquiry was received about the usefulness of the Army diver in personnel recovery. Two days later, the team was sent to assist with the recovery of two missing Marines. A troop carrier with nine Marines aboard had flipped over in a river, and two of them had not been recovered. Over an 8-day period, the team diligently searched a 20-kilometer stretch of the river extending from the crash site to the mouth of the Euphrates River. The team located a 50-caliber machine gun, an M16 rifle, an M9 pistol, and multiple 50-caliber machine gun rounds lost in the accident. In keeping with the Army diver tradition, the team did not leave the site

until the missing personnel were recovered. Local Iraqi civilians discovered the Marines 70 kilometers downstream from the accident site and turned the bodies over to coalition forces.

Reconnaissance

After returning from that mission, the team was requested for a reconnaissance mission on a flooded basement that was scheduled for renovation. The basement had been mysteriously flooded since 2003, and no one knew why. British forces requested outside diving support for the dive team. Due to the uncertainty of the building's condition, the 544th deployed its remotely operated vehicle and viewed the basement from the safety of the building's driest floor.

During the mission, the 544th was needed for the emergency recovery of a downed Hunter unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). For unknown reasons, the UAV plummeted into a small lake, and its recovery was necessary to investigate the cause of the vehicle's malfunction. A four-man team successfully recovered all the parts of the UAV. With the deployment of the four-man team, the detachment spread out and worked on separate tasks. Army engineer dive teams are designed by their very nature to be separately employed autonomously of each other, a feat the 544th has successfully accomplished several times since being deployed to Iraq.



Opposite page: Members of the 544th Engineer Team (Dive) recover a 50-caliber machine gun that was found during a search for missing personnel.

Above: A Soldier conducts a welding operation on a metal ramp.



A diver prepares to cut a rudder on a tugboat.

Salvage

During the recovery mission, a request was received to conduct a reconnaissance and salvage of an Iraqi float bridge. The team focused on this task after completing the recovery mission. Destroyed by coalition forces, the bridge needed to be removed from the water so locals could cross the river in small boats as part of their everyday lives. The team decided to send two separate elements. The first team conducted a reconnaissance of the project site, and the second team brought additional equipment and personnel needed to complete the task. After the first team arrived, it was redirected to conduct a personnel recovery from a helicopter crash elsewhere. The team quickly moved to the crash site, deployed side scan sonar equipment to locate the helicopter, and then conducted diving operations around the clock until they recovered the remains of the two helicopter pilots. The other team members sent additional manpower and equipment to help recover the helicopter. After the successful completion of the mission, the team proceeded to work on the reconnaissance and salvage of the Iraqi float bridge.

Other Missions

In addition, the 544th has worked in Kuwait to accomplish other valuable missions. The team conducted an inspection and repair mission of a security system on an oil platform. Future missions at oil platforms have already been developed for later in the year to increase security and improve the quality of life for the Sailors stationed there.

Other missions included joint work with and for the Kuwait navy. The dive team spent 30 days conducting underwater cutting operations on two old Iraqi tugboats that the Kuwaiti

navy used for target practice. In order to scrap the tugs, the propulsion system needed to be cut off the bottom of each of the tugboats. Once the team cut the propulsion system, using their underwater cutting equipment, the tugboats were beached and scrapped. They also welded a ramp extension together so a Kuwaiti unit could board its vehicles on Army watercraft to conduct a mission. The Kuwaiti vehicles did not have enough clearance and needed a little lift to prevent damage.

Diver Qualification Process

In spite of such a busy schedule, the team managed to squeeze in a deep diving exercise the first week in March that allowed them to qualify some of its newly dubbed First Class Divers. After promotion to staff sergeant, a diver attends First Class Diver School in Panama City Beach, Florida, at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center (NDSTC). After completing the course, the First Class Diver undergoes an extremely

intense qualification process to earn the title of being a qualified diving supervisor and capable of operating on his own. These qualifications and corresponding acquired skills are the backbone of the Army diving community. Becoming qualified allows diving supervisors to be deployed independently to any location in the world to conduct diving operations. As an example of the skill and competence of these staff sergeants, the majority of these missions were completed or supervised by staff sergeants operating independently.

No Job Too Large

The Army diving community is small, and the current presence in-theater is even smaller, but as Army engineer divers of the past have shown, and as the 544th continues to demonstrate during its current deployment, no job is too large. Eventually, the combatant commander will no longer be surprised that Army divers exist, but rather be aware of the benefits they offer and seek out those skills.



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